Unit 5: Bureaucracies

In most countries, education is delivered via large-scale public-sector education bureaucracies. These bureaucracies are complex in a variety of ways. The relevant bureaucracies usually comprise multiple administrative agencies with different and sometimes overlapping functions (e.g., both the curriculum authority and the examinations board influencing what is taught). Furthermore, these agencies and functions are spread across different administrative levels (e.g., central, regional, district, and school). The relevant bureaucracies also face challenges as they aim to deliver education, which itself is a ‘thick’, complex task requiring co-creation between teachers, students, and other actors across numerous and varied classroom contexts.

Given the complexity, conventional civil service bureaucracies face difficult challenges around managing and delivering quality education. A common response to these challenges is a pattern of bureaucratic administration called ‘isomorphic mimicry’. Systems engaged in isomorphic mimicry are characterised by top-down, standardised management that depends on ‘thin’, input-based indicators such as how many textbooks have been distributed or how many students are enrolled. Such thin indicators, if successfully implemented, may enable the system to ‘look like’ it is doing the right thing, when in fact the inputs are not producing the desired ‘thick’ outputs (e.g., ensuring children are learning).

An alternative administrative paradigm involves a ‘thicker’ approach that is centred on a bureaucracy-wide sense of shared purpose or mission. Under this approach, individual bureaucrats are granted the autonomy to make decisions that respond to the needs and challenges of their specific contexts, in alignment with ‘thick’ indicators as goals. At the same time, bureaucrats must be supported with adequate training and resources that enable them to serve the shared purpose. This is particularly the case with the ‘middle tier’ of bureaucrats (e.g., district education officers) who can play a key role in maintaining alignment between the central government, and teachers and schools on the frontline.

After completing the unit, students should:

- Understand the multiple levels and multiple functions of education bureaucracies;
- Explain the limitations of conventional bureaucratic structures in implementing complex service delivery in education; and
- Understand the importance of alignment with a shared purpose and supporting and trusting bureaucrats with autonomy in improving the complex work of education bureaucracies.

Lectures

1. Mission and motivation in public bureaucracies (Dan Honig, University College London)
2. Education systems reforms through X and Y lenses (Dan Honig, University College London)
3. Rewriting the grammar of the education system: The Delhi case (Yamini Aiyar, Centre for Policy Research)
Required Readings

  o Podcast [optional]: https://riseprogramme.org/podcast/yamini-aiyar
  o Webinar with Honig and Aiyar [optional]: https://riseprogramme.org/events/bureaucratic-barriers-or-administrative-actions-role-bureaucracies-successful-education

Further Readings

- On the limitations of narrowly standardized, top-down management and the value of purpose-aligned, empowered autonomy in improving education bureaucracies:
- Further examples of the shortcomings of isomorphic mimicry in reform:


  - Conference presentation video [optional]: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW995lbmkX4&t=23530s&ab_channel=RISEProgramme


- **On different levels within the bureaucracy:**


- **The middle tier: district officials, circuit supervisors, school inspectors, et al.**


• **Empirical evidence on the importance of school-level leaders:**
  
  